DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 160 127 **IR 006 632**

AUTHOR	White, Robert L.
TITLE	Effectiveness of Library Services.
PUB DATE	Oct 77
NOTE	16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group of the Medical Library Association (Richmond, Virginia, October 26-29, 1977)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Decision Making; Library Administration; *Library Programs; Library Services; Policy; *Program Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Evaluation of library service effectiveness is defined in terms of providing objective information to library policy makers and program managers on the effectiveness and cost of alternatives, as well as existing programs and services. The elements of policy and program evaluation are discussed and the need to view evaluation as a continuous process is emphasized. Library administrators are urged to make a strong commitment to support evaluation efforts within their own libraries in order to improve the availability of information for library decision making. A selective bibliography on evaluation is appended. (Author/JPF)

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ED160127

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EFFECTIVENESS OF LIBRARY SERVICES

by

Robert L. White

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INTRODUCTION

Evaluation of public services is becoming more crucial as elected public officials and citizens alike ask the question: Was that group of services or program worth the public resources expended? During the 1960's a great many new domestic programs whose intent was to help alleviate a host of social problems were implemented. Among these new measures were major programs affecting most libraries such as the Library Services and Construction Act of 1964, the Higher Education Act of 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and the Medical Library Assistance Act of 1965. In the last decade we have witnessed the public's attitude turn from hope and idealism to one of outcry for program accountability. Ineffective programs and wasted efforts have eroded public confidence in our public programs and this loss of confidence seems to be growing.

We have left the era of affluence in the 1960's and we are entering the age of scarcity in the 1970's and 1980's. Kenneth Boulding distinguishes between what he calls the "Cowboy Economy" and the "Spaceman Economy". The Cowboy model is our present consumer-oriented economy with its assumption of unlimited production and growth, resources, affluence and technological development. In contrast, the Spaceman model envisions the world as a place with a finite stock of resources which is dependent on a balance with nature and a concern for conservation. In the years ahead it will become quite evident that the "reality of

scarcity" will of necessity displace the "myth of affluence" as embodied in the concept of the Cowboy Economy.

No longer will we have the luxury of assembling and operating public programs at will. Programs will be openly questioned and subject to analysis, review and evaluation. Because our resources are becoming scarce, our society can no longer squander its efforts and dollars on programs and services that fail to meet objectives and make an impact. The demand for information on the effectiveness and worth of government programs will surely increase in the years ahead.

WHAT IS EVALUATION?

For the purpose of this presentation, evaluation will be defined in terms of providing objective information to policy makers and program managers on the effectiveness and costs of alternative as well as existing programs and services.[1]

Traditionally evaluation has been concerned with assessing the effectiveness of on-going or existing programs in achieving their objectives. This type of program evaluation is called impact or product evaluation. However, evaluation should not only be concerned with the final outcome or impact of a program but it should also address itself to identifying policy alternatives available to the decision-maker prior to the selection and implementation of a program. This type of evaluation is called policy evaluation or analysis.

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[1] See Daniel L. Stufflebeam, et. al., Educational Evaluation and Decision Making (Itasca, Illinois: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc. 1971) and Jon F. Wergin, "The Evaluation of Organizational Policy Making: A Political Model", Review of Educational Research, 46 (Winter, 1976), 75-115 for discussions on the interrelationship between evaluation and the decision making process.

It is its intent and purpose and not its method or subject matter that distinguishes evaluation from other social science applications.[2] The basic purpose in performing an evaluation is to provide information for program decision-making.[3] Evaluation is not an ivory tower exercise; it is performed in an action setting environment. It is intended to produce information concerning the effectiveness of proposed alternatives as well as existing programs and by doing so, it is also intended to influence the allocation of scarce resources. Because evaluation is immersed in the action setting environment of decision-making it is closely aligned to the "principle of utility". If evaluation information is not timely or relevant to the issue under investigation, it is a worthless exercise.

It seems quite likely that public organizations will be engaging in more and more evaluation efforts in order to justify their current as well as proposed programs and to compete for increasingly scarce financial resources.

Too often, library administrators fail to think in terms of systematic analysis and evaluation of major library services and programs. Significant library programs are often implemented without the consideration of gathering evaluation information as to possible service options. This consideration of possible program alternatives can provide valuable insights into the estimated consequences, effectiveness and relative costs of each identified option. In addition, when programs and services are designed, and

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[2] See Carol H. Weiss, Evaluation Research (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972), p. 6.

[3] Ibid., p. 14.

before they are implemented, adequate thought should be given on how to evaluate those very services or programs as to their impact and effectiveness. Not only new services, but established ones as well are for the most part often assumed to be effective without evaluating the basic objectives and strategies of these programs. The particular program or service may not have been applied to the appropriate problem or perhaps the program may not have been structured in such a way to ensure that the intended impact is realized. A program evaluation can contribute to the important decision of determining whether a program should be continued as presently designed, changed, or terminated. Most often, evaluation is employed to assist in the modifying and improving of a program and not its termination. The goal of evaluation should be to provide information to improve policy decisions, programs and services.[4]

Evaluation information and findings if they are to be of any value must be linked to the decision-making process. Evaluation can be effectively connected to policy making by institutionalizing it via the budgetary process. Planning-programming-budgeting-system, better known as PPBS, is an example of how evaluation and policy making can be logically linked. Policy and program evaluation are essential components of PPBS and evaluation thus becomes institutionalized under this budgeting and decision-making approach.[5]

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[4] Ibid., p. 44.

[5] See Harry P. Hatry, "Overview of Modern Program Analysis Characteristics and Techniques" (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1969), p. 39 and Weiss, Evaluation Research, p. 88-91 for a discussion of this point.

ELEMENTS OF EVALUATION

What are the primary elements or components of "Policy Evaluation" and "Program Evaluation"?

Policy Evaluation is useful in comparing and examining alternative ways of reaching public objectives. The principal purpose of policy evaluation is to assist in delineating possible policy and program directions. There are generally ten elements of a policy analysis or evaluation and I would like to briefly describe them to you.[6]

First, there must be a "needs assessment" or definition of the library "problem" under investigation. The scope of the problem should be discussed, the library's client groups or service populations described, and an indication as to the severity of the problem area should be discussed.

Second, the primary service "objectives" should be enumerated. It is desirable to state objectives as clearly as possible and in a way that will allow the measurement of the listed objectives. The listing and description of objectives that are capable of being measured is of the upmost importance in a policy evaluation.

Third, criteria or "measures of effectiveness" should be selected next. After the library evaluator has identified the objectives, it is necessary to translate the identified objectives into measurable effectiveness criteria or indicators. During this process, policy objectives are operationalized by translating those objectives into measurable indicators of effectiveness.[7] In addition, the dollar cost should be utilized as a criteria for evaluating any proposed alternative.

[6] See Harry P. Hatry, "Program Analysis---Hero or Villain" (Washington,D.C.: Urban Institute, 1969) and Harry P. Hatry, et.al., Program Analysis for State and Local Governments (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1976) for a more detailed discussion of these elements.

[7] See Richard A. Gabriel, Program Evaluation: A Social Science Approach (New York: MSS Publications, Inc., 1975) p.54-55 for a discussion on operationalizing objectives.

Fourth, the major characteristics and details of the "alternate ways" of attempting to meet the objectives should be described. For the most part, evaluators consider no more than five or six alternatives for in-depth analytical purposes.

Fifth, the "cost" of each proposed alternative must be estimated. The types of costs that should be considered are investment costs, operating costs, opportunity costs and associated costs.

Sixth, the "effectiveness" of each alternative must be estimated against the established system criteria or requirements.

Seventh, a presentation should be made comparing the "assets and liabilities" of the alternatives based on their costs and effects. Display formats such as tables and charts are very instructive in presenting this type of information.

Eighth, the major "uncertainties" and "assumptions" involved with each alternative should be clearly presented.

Ninth, the "feasibility of implementing" the various options or alternatives should also be considered when conducting a policy evaluation. Any special requirements needed for implementation should be documented. In addition, a tentative time schedule for implementing the desired alternative should also be presented.

Tenth, the evaluation and report findings should be documented in such a way that it allows individuals reading the analysis to understand and evaluate the findings and recommendations for action.

In contrast to policy evaluation which assesses alternate ways of reaching public objectives, program evaluation is concerned with the assessment of existing programs. Program evaluation strives to assess the effectiveness of an existing program in meeting its objectives. It relies on the principle of research design to identify the program's effects as distinguished from non-program factors that may influence the desired program outcome. In addition, it aims at improving present programs through needed adjustment to existing program strategies and activities. Program evaluation can provide invaluable information to the library decision-maker on the essential question of whether a program or service under investigation requires modification or adjustments. There are generally seven elements of a typical program evaluation.[8]

First, the existing program must be described and this should include an accurate description of the "program's activities", operations and the identification of the "program's client groups".

Second, the program's service "objectives" should be identified. One of the most fundamental steps in the evaluation process involves the difficult task of actually trying to define what the program hopes to accomplish in terms of its goals and objectives. The evaluator must identify objectives or desired outcomes and then measure the actual with the desired program performance.

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[8] See Harry P. Hatry, et. al., Practical Program Evaluation for State and Local Government Officials (Washington, D. C.: Urban Institute 1973) for a straightforward description of program evaluation.

Third, criteria or "measures of effectiveness", based on the identified program objectives, must be developed. In order to make a valid statement about program effectiveness the evaulator must be able to conceptualize and develop indicators of program outcomes. If program objectives are not operationalized properly, then the program evaluator cannot proceed to analyze the intent and impact of the program under investigation.

Fourth, an "evaluation design" must be developed.[9] The evaluation design helps to provide to evaluator with answers to research questions and allows the evaluator to organize the collected program data in order to come to grips with the appraisal or assessment problem. By using an evaluation design the evaluator is able to impose some discipline and control in the pursuit of program evaluation. The design is intended to help the evaluator determine what changes can be attributed to the program rather than non-program factors. The type of evaluation design utilized should be influenced by the purpose and circumstances surrounding the evaluation study. There are three general types of evaluation design: experimental, quasi-experimental and non-experimental. The most rigorous and scientific of the designs are the experimental designs, followed by quasi-experimental designs, and the least rigorous are the non-experimental designs. There is no one right evaluation design. The most appropriate evaluation design is the one which allows the

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[9] See Donald T. Campbell and Julian C. Stanley, Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963) for a thorough discussion of research designs.

evaluator to arrive at the most valid results from the data, given the limitations that necessarily surround the process of program assessment.

Fifth, the evaluator must collect data on the program's performance. There are basically two methods of collecting data: asking individuals and non-reactive measures. Asking individuals basically involves survey research type methods such as face-to-face interviews, mail questionnaires, and telephone surveys.[10] The second major method for collecting data can be classified as "unobtrusive" or "non-reactive" measures.[11] Non-reactive measures provide the evaluator with alternate ways of collecting data which can supplement the traditional interviews or questionnaires in social science research. The three major categories of unobtrusive measures are physical evidence, archival records, and simple observation.

Sixth, the evaluator must compare the collected program data and analyze what differences exist between intended versus actual program performance.

Seventh, the program findings and recommendations should be documented in a clear and understandable format. If evaluation information is to be effective and have an ultimate impact on the decision-making process, the evaluation results must be intelligible and understood by the decision-maker.

Policy evaluation seeks to assess the effectiveness of program alternatives, while program evaluation attempts to measure the effectiveness of existing programs. There is an interdependence

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[10] See Weiss, Evaluation Research, p. 53.

[11] See Eugene J. Webb, et. al., Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966) for a full description of these type of measures.

between policy and program evaluation. Program evaluation data often serves as an important source of information for policy evaluation. In addition, policy evaluation oftentimes will include an existing program as an alternative which requires a program evaluation.

EVALUATION AS A PROCESS

Evaluation should not be viewed as a single shot affair but should and can be most effective when it becomes an on-going procedure of policy analysis and program modification.

The evaluation of policies and programs should be employed selectively where it will have the most effect or utility. Evaluation is an expensive and time consuming process which should not be undertaken randomly or haphazardly. Most organizations, including libraries, do not have the available time or resources to evaluate every set of policy alternatives or programs. In addition, some programs and services do not easily lend themselves to rigorous evaluation and assessment. However, policy and program evaluation should be employed for major and basic policy decisions that have a direct effect or bearing on the future development of an organization.

An institution's organizational structure should be designed in such a way that evaluation is able to serve the purpose of feeding back information into the decision-making process. Major services and programs should include an evaluation component with a feedback loop to the decision-making and planning process. During the design and development of new services and programs, adequate thought should

be given to documenting objectives and measures of effectiveness in order to establish a program-monitoring-system to provide continuous program performance information. In addition, full consideration should be given to the possibility of institutionalizing evaluation by incorporating it into the budget-making process.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

If evaluation is to provide information for library decision-making there must be a strong commitment on the part of library administrators to support evaluation efforts within their own libraries.

Librarians should look at their programs critically; and seriously engage in evaluation in order to improve library services to the library's client groups. Libraries do provide worthwhile services and programs to their client populations and in no way should librarians shy away from an ongoing and critical assessment of their major activities and operations.

Programs and services should evolve and develop in response to changing circumstances. Rather than relying solely on intuition or visceral feelings, the evaluation process can provide the information needed by library decision-makers in order to make the required adjustments and choices to keep library services current and relevant.

If library policy and program evaluation is to have any effect or impact, it must be part of the process of information gathering, planning and decision-making. Evaluation can serve as an effective information gathering and assessment technique for improving library policy and program decision-making.

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